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ABSTRACT

How children use language affects the likelihood that a request will be granted. This study explored children's requests in a natural setting, by analyzing unedited letters to Santa from 824 children (20% age 6 and under; 41% age 7 and 8; and 39% age 9 and over) in the newspapers of a southeastern metropolitan area. Letters were examined for differences in politeness and directness that could be attributed to children's age and sex. Analysis found that a surprising number of children in this sample were not polite to Santa, and no developmental progression in politeness was found. Girls did not differentiate pragmatic rules as much as boys. In general, letters written by girls were more polite than those by boys, and older children's requests were more indirect than those of younger children. However, boys appeared to adjust their language to a greater degree than did girls, especially in relationship to cost and quantity of their requests. (WP)

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"All I Want for Christmas": Language Pragmatics and Children's Letters to Santa

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Abstract

Children's use of politeness affects the likelihood that a request will be granted. To study children's requests in a natural setting, unedited letters to Santa from 824 children (M = 95 mos., 20% age 6 and under; 41% age 7 and 8; 39% age 9 and over) published in a southeastern metropolitan area newspaper (27% minority population) were analyzed. Letters were examined for differences in politeness and directness that could be attributed to children's age and sex. Letters written by girls were more polite, and older children's requests were more indirect. However, boys appeared to adjust their language to a greater degree than did girls, especially in relationship to cost and quantity of their requests.

"All I Want for Christmas": Language Pragmatics

and Children's Letters to Santa

How children use language affects the likelihood of receiving requests. By 30 months of age children add a politeness dimension to their requests (Bates, 1976). By ages 3 and 4 requests become more indirect, although improvements in pragmatic use of directives continue throughout the elementary school years (Liebling, 1988; Wilkinson, Wilkinson, Spinelli, & Chiang, 1984). Even though children understand the advantages of politeness at age 6, only 9-year-olds were found to have fully mastered the polite register (Axia & Baroni, 1985). Further-more, girls are typically more polite in their requests from preschool (Becker & Smenner, 1986; Klecan-Aker, 1986) through the adult years (Holtgraves & Yang, 1992). Acquisition of concrete operational thinking may be central to the new pragmatic awaren which emerges in middle childhood (Axia & Baroni, 1985; Garton & Pratt, 1990; children are beginning to produce and comprehend a wide range of request forms which they can express both orally (Becker, 1986) and in writing (Pinsent, 1984).

Pragmatic development entails understanding the social distance between the speaker and listener, power of the listener, and imposition of the request (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Children's letters to Santa present a naturalistic opportunity to further explore development of language pragmatics. Both the content and form of their requests should show corresponding developmental changes.

Method

Sample

A total of 824 children (M age = 95 mos.) responded to a southeastern newspaper's request for letters to Santa. Girls wrote 57% of the letters which were published (unedited) in the Florida Times Union prior to Christmas 1992 and 1993. Children resided in a metropolitan area of one million (27% minority population) that ranked 55th in the national television market. Based upon a developmental progression in children's belief in Santa (Prentice, Manosevitz, & Hubbs, 1978), three age-related groupings were identified as 'believers' (6 and under), 'transitional' (7 and 8), and 'nonbelievers' (9 and over). These groupings made up 20%, 41%, and 39% of the sample respectively.

Scoring

Letters were scored for: (a) length (number of words), (b) polite statements such as "please", "thank you", or other polite phrases (0 = below average, 1 = average politeness, 2 or more statements = above average), and (c) directness of requests. Requested items were scored for: (a) number of toys and non-toys, (b) specific requests for others, (c) intangible requests (i.e., world peace), (d) total and average toy price, and (e) number of toys over $100 each. Prices were obtained from a national toy store chain. Children's references to their behavior (i.e., "I've been good") or religious aspects of the holiday were also scored. Interrater reliability of five scorers ranged from .95 to 1.00 (M = .98).

Results

Politeness

Table 1 indicates that, as politeness increased, letters became longer [F (2,812) = 9.41,

$p < .001$], more indirect ($\chi^2(2) = 83.78$), $p < .001$), and included more references to their behavior ($\chi^2(2) = 7.23$, $p < .05$). The most polite children requested less expensive toys [$F(2,617) = 2.36$, $p = .09$]. Children who included no polite statements asked for the most toys ($\chi^2(44) = 58.85$, $p = .06$), with the highest overall cost [$F(2,617) = 3.28$, $p < .05$], and more toys over $100 each ($\chi^2(2) = 5.21$, $p = .07$).

Insert Table 1 about here

Indirectness

As seen in Table 1, indirect letters were longer [$F(1,812) = 53.94$, $p < .001$] and requested fewer items ($\chi^2(26) = 52.29$, $p < .001$) or toys ($\chi^2(22) = 44.49$, $p < .01$), although the average toy price was not significantly different. Children who wrote indirect letters were more likely to tell Santa about their behavior ($\chi^2(1) = 13.13$, $p < .001$), and to include some reference to the religious aspect of the holiday ($\chi^2(1) = 6.72$, $p < .01$). However, they were less likely to make requests for others ($\chi^2(1) = 3.00$, $p = .08$), and did not differ in their requests for intangibles.

Sex Differences

Table 1 shows that girls' letters were more polite ($\chi^2(2) = 8.25$, $p < .01$). and longer than boys' letters [$F(1,812) = 3.36$, $p < .001$]. Girls requested more items ($\chi^2(26) = 41.33$, $p < .05$), and were more likely than boys to note the religious aspect of the holiday ($\chi^2(1) = 3.08$, $p = .07$). Among children wanting toys, boys' requests were more expensive including higher overall cost [$F(1,617) = 2.68$, $p = .10$], higher average toy price [$F(1,617) = 6.23$, $p < .01$], and more requests for toys over $100 each ($\chi^2(1) = 3.61$, $p < .05$).

Age Differences

Table 1 indicates that, with increasing age, children's letters became longer [F (2,697) = 24.60, $p < .001$] and more indirect ($\chi^2(2) = 8.22$, $p < .01$), but not more polite. They were also less likely to include any reference to their own behavior ($\chi^2(2) = 8.73$, $p < .01$), although older children made more requests for intangibles such as food and shelter for the homeless ($\chi^2(2) = 40.72$, $p < .001$). Although the number of items ($\chi^2(44) = 70.25$, $p < .01$) and toys ($\chi^2(38) = 51.07$, $p = .07$) requested decreased as children got older, the average price of each toy increased [F (2,522) = 9.73, $p < .001$].

Table 2 reports significant 3-way interactions for age, sex, and request directness in overall price [F (2,528) = 4.79, $p < .01$] and average price of toys requested [F 2,528) = 7.90, $p < .001$]. By age 9, it appears that boys became more indirect when asking for more costly toys, but girls did not. A 3-way interaction trend was also found for age, sex, and politeness in number of items [F (4,697) = 2.13, $p = .07$] and toys requested [F (4,522) = 2.17, $p = .07$]. By age 9, boys who reduced politeness also reduced the size of their requests, but girls did not.

Insert Table 2 about here

Discussion

A surprising number of children in this sample were not polite to Santa. Although this study reiterated previous findings that girls are more polite, no developmental progression in politeness was found. However, age-related changes were noted for indirect requests that

correspond well with other researchers' suggestions that development of concrete operational thought is critical for pragmatic changes that appear around age 9. What then can explain children's frequent lack of politeness with Santa? Perhaps the perceived social distance and power of Santa are fairly low, and requests to him do not seem an imposition because Santa's job is to grant requests. Thus, being polite to Santa may not be deemed necessary.

Another interesting finding was that, when writing to Santa, girls did not differentiate pragmatic rules as much as boys. With age, boys adjusted their language more than did girls, especially in relationship to cost and quantity of requests. Because experience dictates the level of necessary politeness needed to gain a goal (Bates, 1976), it is possible that experience in making requests could explain a portion of these findings. Further research is needed to determine why boys are more likely to adjust their language code to fit requests of an economic nature.

The developmental progression in children's requests for intangibles may suggest acquisition of universal empathy corresponding to cognitive development (Hoffman, 1984). They are beginning to see beyond their isolated world and notice the problems of people they have never encountered. Thus, increased empathy is reflected in older children's increased wishes for world peace and food for the poor.

This study demonstrated that both the content and form of children's letters change with age. However, Santa may not notice these changes as readily as do the adults who must fulfill children's wishes.

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Table 1

Categorized Requests by Pragmatic Usage, Sex, and Age Groupings

	Politeness			Directness		Sex Differences		Age Differences		
	Below	Avg	Above	Indirect	Direct	Girls	Boys	Believers (6 and under)	Transitional (7 and 8)	Nonbelievers (9 and over)
Politeness										
%Below						40%	48%**	42%	46%	42%
%Average						38%	36%**	36%	36%	40%
%Above						22%	16%**	22%	18%	18%
%Indirect	29.20%	55.30%	67.90%***			48%	44%	38%	48%	52%**
Letter Length (# of words)	41.09%	47.34%	62.14***	57.62	38.70***	51.61	42.00***	33.51	48.96	54.70***
# of Items	4.38	3.17	3.78	3.06	4.46***	4.01	3.54*	4.31	3.66	3.14**
# of Toys	3.38	2.38	2.86+	2.34	3.38***	2.92	2.88	3.68	2.83	2.11***
If Toys Requested										
# Toys	4.37	3.16	3.72+	3.28	4.19**	3.87	3.71	4.25	[illegible]	3.28+
Tot. toy price	$177.01	$137.70	$121.41*	$131.44	$167.29	$138.89	$168.36+	$132.50	$[illegible].58	$157.34
Per toy price	$50.22	$ 54.72	$ 42.27+	$ 51.72	$ 49.28	$ 46.47	$ 55.35	$ 37.72	$ 51.27	$ 59.33***
% over $100	27.60%	24.19%	17.20%+	19.40%	28.10%	21.4%	28.1%+	18.6%	25.2%	25.4%
Requests for										
Others	11.20%	12.60%	12.60%	9.90%	13.80%+	12.7%	11.0%	10.1%	11.7%	12.0%
Intangibles	20.50%	26.20%	17.60%	21.10%	22.90%	23.8%	19.8%	8.7%	20.6%	34.5%
References to										
Self Behavior	26.10%	35.00%	34.60%*	37.30%	25.60%***	31.0%	31.2%	38.9%	30.9%	25.1%**
Religious	3.10%	4.20%	5.00%	5.70%	2.3%**	4.9%	2.5%+	4.7%	2.7%	5.1%

Key: + = p < .10 * = p < .05 ** = p < .01 *** = p < .001

Note: Column totals exceed 100% because children made requests in multiple categories.

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Table 2

3-Way Interactions Between Pragmatic Usage, Sex, and Age

	Girls			Boys		
Ages:	Believers 6 & under	Transi-tional 7 & 8	Non-believers 9 & over	Believers 6 & under	Transi-tional 7 & 8	Non-believers 9 & over
Total Toy Price:						
Indirect	$107.63	$119.39	$117.86	$151.52	$112.56	$181.83
Direct	$124.97	$150.18	$183.53	$147.92	$202.69	$144.32
Per Toy Price:						
Indirect	$ 29.02	$57.62	$ 51.09	$ 33.07	$ 45.17	$ 75.10
Direct	$ 36.85	$38.38	$ 56.37	$ 46.93	$ 61.95	$ 56.57
# Toys Politeness						
Below	4.21	4.18	4.52	5.40	4.44	3.00
Average	2.75	3.00	2.98	3.00	2.09	3.17
Above	5.55	2.50	2.79	5.10	4.50	2.23
# Items Politeness						
Below	4.50	4.35	4.60	5.41	4.37	2.37
Average	2.48	3.38	2.69	2.93	2.42	2.64
Above	5.61	2.68	3.77	5.90	4.19	2.21